

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Edward Murray, Mayor of Seattle

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Citizens in Seattle Know the Importance of Transit

During the time when I was chair of transportation we passed the largest transportation taxes in the state's history. As a city, we are now one of the fastest growing cities in America. Just a year ago we passed Boston in population. We increased bus transit service through a ballot measure last November, the largest increase in bus transit service in Seattle since the metro transit system was created in the 1970s. Voters who live here get that in the city we need more than just roads to be able to move around, and if we continue to grow we're going to need even more transit. Last August the voters passed a measure that will significantly fund our parks and our community centers—again, a major investment in infrastructure that will improve the quality of life. I think that's one of the ways that you get people to support these things, because it's clear what you're spending the money on.

We're a Wealthy Country, So Why Can't We Compete?

In the legislature I chaired first the capital budget, which is the state's construction budget, and then the transportation budget, which of course is the state's transportation construction budget. In both cases what I learned is that this is a country and a state that is falling behind the rest of the world, because we're not investing in infrastructure. This country has a better economy, is wealthier than any place in the world. If the Chinese can build infrastructure, if the Communist Chinese can build infrastructure, then certainly a republic like the United States should be able to compete, and we're just not right now. The revenue—the wealth—exists, and the returns are huge. To make our ports work, to make sure our roads and bridges are safe, we can't afford not to do it. I sit here in Seattle, and just north of us in British Columbia they're building ports and they're building connections to the center of the continent that are going to clean our clocks unless the federal government steps up and partners with us.

Infrastructure Helps Businesses Thrive

Businesses need roads and sewer systems and electricity and the internet to function, the internet being the major infrastructure challenge, I think, of the 21st century. They need these things to function. So it is an issue of creating jobs and equity, but it is also a business issue. I think if people step away from ideology and look at how do you make the economy work, how do you create jobs, how do you help business, how do you make business very successful, then I think folks will move forward. But if you're focused on ideology around taxes and revenue, versus how you move the country forward, it's just going to stay stuck. The concept of infrastructure, the federal government spending money on infrastructure, really originated with the Republican Party. It really originated with Abraham Lincoln, who used to talk about internal

improvements, the need for the federal government to step up and build those, what he called “internal improvements,” canals and railroads and the like, that make an economy function.

Why the Federal Government Needs to Step Up

We are so far behind in building the transit infrastructure we need. If we want to be competitive in the future worldwide, we as a city, the metropolitan region, and the state have simply got to invest in infrastructure. And we need the federal government to return and become a partner in this. When you have the federal government paralyzed, you see cities and metropolitan regions and states stepping up to fund. But there are two dangers there: one is that certain areas of the country will benefit because certain areas have more resources to tax themselves, and so that creates an inequity nationally that I’m not sure we want to return to. Secondly, we can’t do it by ourselves. The freeways and ports that we have were created in partnership with the federal government. Our ability to renovate them and make sure they work for the 21st century can’t be done without the federal government as a partner.

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